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Cultural Considerations in the Experience of Aging: Two African Cultures

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*The idea that one might fear or resent
growing up or old does not evidently
occur in traditional preliterate,
preindustrial societies. —M. FORTES¹*

*Life is good when you are a young adult.
In middle age you have heavy
responsibilities and you lose your energy
and ambition. Then when you are old you
just lay in the hut, cry for food, and think
about death. —AN OLD HERERO INFORMANT*

Chapter

2

Cultural Considerations in the Experience of Aging: Two African Cultures

PATRICIA DRAPER
HENRY HARPENDING

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, readers will be able to:

- 1 Identify the important cultural factors that affect the experience of aging.
- 2 Compare the roles and activities and the attitudes about aging in two African cultures.
- 3 Describe the relevance of findings in those cultures to the understanding of aging in other cultures.
- 4 Discuss ways in which cultural factors relate to the provision of health care services.

In recent years anthropologists have become increasingly interested in aging in different cultures.^{2,3} The literature addresses a number of questions about aging and society. How and why does the meaning of aging vary from one society to the next? Do societal complexity and scale predict regular outcomes for elders?⁴ Do elders usually fare well in simple, traditional societies where the experience of old people is valued?⁵ What effects do culture change and economic development have on older adults?^{6,7} As field studies of aging in

non-Western societies emerge, scholars realize that attitudes and roles about aging are influenced by myriad cultural factors. No single set of predictors of graceful versus stressful aging are likely to emerge.

Understanding of cultural factors is vital to effective intervention with clients. Culture shapes attitudes and actions, requiring understanding of roles and activities of older adults in a particular culture, attitudes about aging, and the way in which older individuals are valued by the culture. These factors are mediated by:

- The sophistication of the culture
- Changes in a culture over time
- Economic status of the culture
- The degree to which the culture is settled in a specific place
- Demographic factors such as the proportion of older versus younger individuals

However, some beliefs about effects of these mediating variables may not be accurate.

For example, Simmons⁸ theorized that in traditional societies the numbers of elders would be few and they would be held in high esteem because of their rarity and accumulation of knowledge. A closer look at older adults in a wide range of societies reveals that economy, material wealth, and settlement pattern are important intervening variables.⁹ In societies with a secure economic base and permanent settlements, adults are able to care for elders while maintaining themselves and children. On the other hand, people in more simple societies, such as those of the hunter-gatherers and pastoral nomads, were more likely to practice senilicide or other forms of death hastening.¹⁰ Such treatment, while harsh, was judged by members of these cultures, including the old themselves, to be necessary for the welfare of others.

Perhaps the most persistent theme in studies of aging in non-Western societies is the finding that people are more likely to age well in durable social contexts.^{11,12} They age in familiar communities and among the same people they have known throughout their lives, con-

ditions that permit continuity. Another finding has to do with continuity in work roles. Productive work in traditional societies is often minimally differentiated except by sex and only broadly by age. Adult work roles emerge in late childhood or adolescence and are carried out more or less continuously thereafter. Retirement from productive roles is not clearly marked. Instead, people gradually relinquish the more demanding physical tasks as their capabilities wane.

The proportion of the population that is "old" is determined by the birth rate in a population. High levels of fertility lead to broad-based age-sex pyramids of which the old are a small proportion, while low-fertility populations are characterized by columnar age-sex pyramids with high ratios of the old to the not-yet-old. Paradoxically, mortality rates and life expectancy have little effect on the proportion of old people in a population.¹³ This is because changes in longevity are reflective of reductions in early mortality due to infectious disease. *Life span*, the hypothesized maximum number of years that humans can survive (assuming the best possible set of genes and most supportive possible environment), is constant at approximately 120 years.

The relative numbers of older adults could conceivably work either for or against their well-being. Large numbers of elderly individuals could be politically visible and active, as is the case at present in the United States. On the other hand, when older people require care, it should be more readily available if there are more children and adults. In cultures where there are fewer older individuals, they might be more highly valued because they represent rare repositories of history and wisdom.

These expectations shape beliefs that influence both policy and intervention for older individuals. There is concern, for example, about changing demographics in the United States as having the potential to create an "excess" of elderly individuals, and an accompanying devaluing or resentment. Similarly, there is increasing attention to the possibility of altering policies about retire-

ment to encourage more gradual reduction in work roles (an emerging trend even without policy incentives).

The case study here discusses the process of aging and the cultural context in which it occurs in two societies in Botswana, Africa: the !Kung Bushmen and the Herero (Fig. 2-1). These studies were carried out as part of a multicultural study of aging in five different cultures around the world.* Several special features of the study make it particularly valuable:

- The !Kung and the Herero inhabit the same regions in Botswana, yet they contrast markedly. Physically, culturally, economically, and linguistically the two groups are dissimilar. Until recently some !Kung have lived as mobile hunter-gatherers. The Herero, much more affluent than the !Kung, have a long historical tradition of pastoralism. These two adjacent groups offer many opportunities for observing the importance of cultural and eco-

nomic factors in shaping the aging process.

- Unlike many non-Western populations, older people are not rare among the !Kung and the Herero. People over 60 years constitute about 14 percent of the total population in both groups, a figure similar to percentages of elders in modern Westernized countries. This is unlike Botswana as a whole, where people over 60 comprise 6 percent of the population.¹⁴
- Although the economic basis of life for the two groups is different, they share very simple levels of technology. With few labor-saving devices, the physical demands of daily life are substantial, posing real challenges for older people.
- The social structures of the two groups are very different. The differing institutional contexts have important implications for the quality of life of older adults.
- Despite marked differences in social institutions, the !Kung and Herero are unanimous in their negative evaluations of aging. Young and old in both groups agree that getting older has no redeeming value. This last finding is especially significant for it illustrates an important lesson for all who learn about another culture. Outsiders with a "view from without" may conclude, given knowledge of certain social norms, values, and institutions in a particular society, that the lives of elders must be good or bad, as the case may be. In fact, the view from without may not be supported by those who have a "view from within."

*This project involved seven investigators in two sites in North America, two sites in Ireland, one in Hong Kong, and the two African sites that we describe in this paper. The overall project was directed by Jennie Keith and Christine Fry.



Figure 2-1 Location of !Kung and Herero tribes.

This study underscores the need for health care practitioners to analyze the cultural factors that may affect clients' expectations about what old age will be like, their plans and goals for this period of their lives, their values and attitudes about being older, and their motivations for engaging in or withdrawing from activity. It also underscores the need to set aside beliefs based on a view from without, possibly the view held by the health care practitioner, and to take the time to

really understand the perspective of those within.

What follows is an ethnographic summary of the !Kung and Herero. We discuss the significance of demography and the demographic structures of our two populations for the work roles of older individuals. We describe the requirements for everyday living for elders and the nature of the work contributions made by them. We detail certain social institutions and customs that have a significant impact on their quality of life. Finally, we report the evaluations by elders themselves of their functional abilities and provide anecdotal accounts of how old people view their own circumstances.

ETHNOGRAPHY OF TWO AFRICAN SOCIETIES

The !Kung

The !Kung of today live by a combination of food producing and food gathering-hunting techniques. They keep small stock, a few cattle, and they tend gardens while continuing to obtain a substantial portion of their livelihood from hunting and gathering. !Kung are extremely poor. Many people own no stock, others own only a few cattle and goats. Without a government-instituted program of food relief, the !Kung would have faced real hunger during the last decade of severe drought in the region. They have a subsistence-level economy, that is, they work directly to feed themselves. Cash has little relevance for them. For further information about the !Kung, see Lee and DeVore,¹⁵ Draper,¹⁶ Howell,¹⁷ Marshall,¹⁸ or Draper and Cashdan.¹⁹

The residential unit is a village composed of a group of people, ordinarily about 30 individuals, related to each other by kinship and marriage ties with both parents. Most !Kung are monogamous, and marriages tend to be durable. The relationship a person has with his or her spouse is an important source of economic support and companionship.

The Herero

The Herero are pastoralists who live in Namibia and Botswana. They live in homesteads, each owned by a senior male, and manage large herds of cattle, goats, and occasionally sheep. In some areas they have large fields, tended by women and old men. They maintain both patrilineages and matrilineages, that is, they have double unilineal descent. This means that family lines are understood both through the paternal set of relatives and the maternal set, although the matrilineages seem to be more salient.

The Herero in Botswana are descendants of refugees from a German war of extermination begun in 1904 in (the then) South West Africa. In three generations they have changed from impoverished refugees to one of the most prosperous tribes in the region. In the face of this rapid change, they maintain a committed ethnicity: The women all wear Victorian dresses and a unique bonnet, senior male lineage members (men related through specific male lines of descent) maintain ancestral fires that are the center of religious observances and family ceremonies, and there is little marriage outside the tribe.

Marriage is often polygynous, and it is not durable. There is much divorce and even more formal abandonment of marriages, especially when the wife passes the age of childbearing. Many children are born outside of marriage, and there is no stigma attached to unmarried childbearing. Many women, especially from prosperous families, prefer not to marry. Children of unmarried women may remain with the mother's family or move to the biological father's family upon payment of a fee.

The bases of subsistence are milk and occasional meat from the cattle, goats, and sheep, along with the maize meal, sugar, and tea purchased with the proceeds of the sale of livestock. Men are responsible for the management of cattle, while women are responsible for milking the cattle, churning the milk in gourds, and so on. House building and maintenance are stereotyped as the

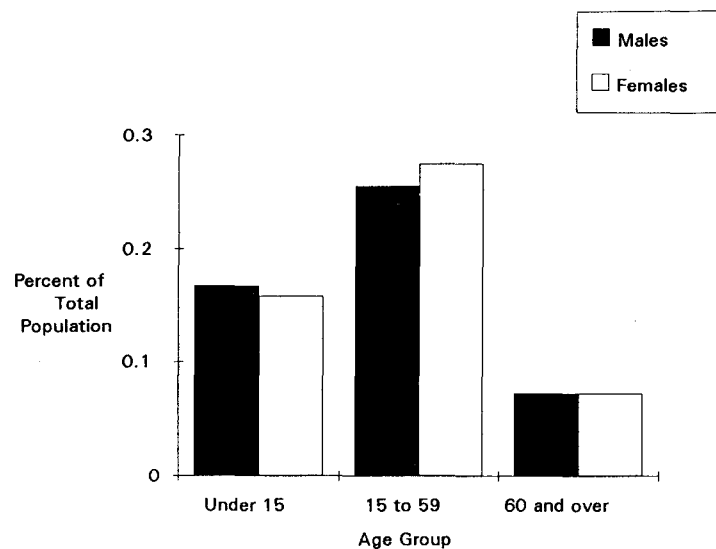


Figure 2-2 Age distribution of !Kung.

work of women, but men are often observed helping with the heavier parts of this task. Excellent descriptions of Herero can be found in papers by Gibson^{20,21,22} and Vivello.²³

Demography

Both the !Kung and Herero have had low to moderate fertility, and older adults are not scarce. The child-elder ratio is 1.2 for !Kung and 1.1 for the

Herero (Figs. 2-2 and 2-3). Despite close similarity in the numbers of available children, the two societies make very different use of the potential labor pool represented by children. The work performance of old people in the two societies varies accordingly.

The demography of the !Kung is described by Nancy Howell.²⁴ In our census data, 14.3 percent (142 out of 991) of the living population is over 60 years of age. Every seventh person is, by our criterion, old. Old people are promi-

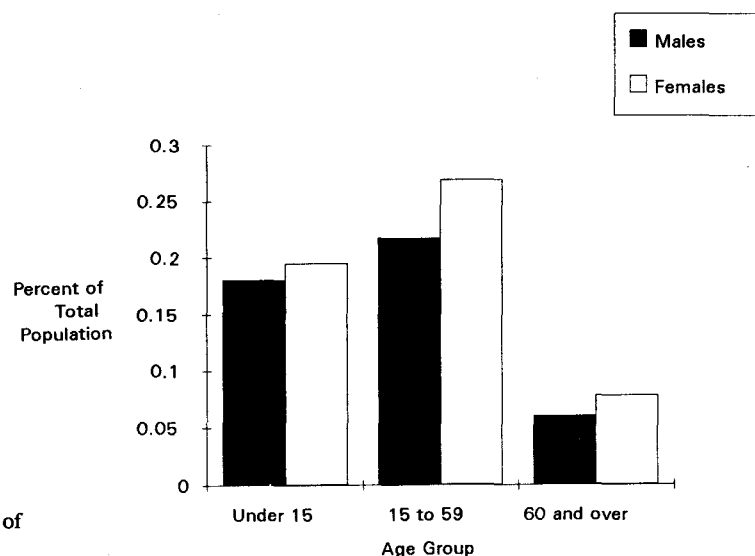


Figure 2-3 Age distribution of Herero.

nent in the daily life of !Kung villages, and the aged nature of this population is immediately apparent to a casual observer.

There are relatively few children; the price of a low birthrate is a scarcity of helpers for the dependent old. It is tempting to draw a parallel between the plight of the !Kung and that of Americans contemplating shortfalls in the social security system because there are not enough younger people paying in.

The proportion of people older than age 60 among the Herero is 14.0 percent (350 out of 2636). The high proportion of older individuals in both societies reflects the low fertility rates of these populations in the past.

Birth rates in both groups continue to increase, so that the proportion of old people is declining. The Herero are recovering from a historical infertility which, in the past meant that the *mean generation time*—roughly the average age difference between mothers and their children—changed from 22 years to almost 30 years.²⁵ Children of very old women today are also themselves old (a situation that is emerging in the United States at present), while in coming years very old women will have younger adult children to help with their care.

THE DEMANDS OF EVERYDAY LIFE AND AGING

Although the social environment of aging in simple societies may be desirable and generally superior to that of aging in complex industrial societies, the physical environment does not permit older adults to cushion themselves against the physical losses of aging. There are no toilets, no running water, no electricity, no analgesics, no dental prostheses, and few eyeglasses. Furniture is, by Western standards, scarce. Old people do not have soft mattresses, nor do they all have enough blankets to keep warm. The differences between !Kung and Herero are evident with respect to these factors. Many Herero are

much more affluent than even the most prosperous !Kung; they have more clothing, more blankets, more substantial housing, and, as we discuss in a later section, more services from junior kin.

!Kung Society

With the exception of the periodic government distribution of maize meal, !Kung work directly to feed themselves. Water is carried from wells as much as 3 km distant from villages. All fuel for cooking or warmth is gathered in the form of firewood, which tends to be scarce near villages. Women, the chief firewood collectors, must walk several kilometers to collect enough firewood for cooking and warmth during the cold season. Not all !Kung clear and cultivate gardens, but those who do have an arduous task felling trees, clearing grass, and fencing against cattle. The work of lifting bucket after bucket of water from wells 30 to 50 feet in depth falls to men of all ages, though women assist in this work when the men are unavailable. Stock must be hand watered for at least 6 months of the year, which is a substantial task.

Everyone who is neither very young nor very old performs the same chores, though with varying degrees of vigor depending upon age and health, and, to some extent, sex. The !Kung have only recently given up their nomadic hunting and gathering lifestyle, with its extremely rudimentary division of labor, and have so far made few concessions to dividing labor more efficiently.

Older people are ambivalent about their declining ability to work. People of all ages value physical vigor and old !Kung are no exception. Physical decline leads to a high level of complaint about aches and pains and the insensitivity of kin in not doing more for them.²⁶ On the other hand, old people remain physically active as long as possible. They derive self-esteem from the belief that because they are still able to do some things, they are therefore “able to take

care of themselves." People in their sixties and seventies make occasional gathering trips to the bush, though always accompanied by younger people. Unless they are quite decrepit, they collect their own firewood and water, gather their own grasses for roof repairs, and collect bush food. Although it takes older people longer to do these things, they are primary providers for themselves and their spouses. House building and maintenance are tasks for which most older people require help. The labor involved is onerous because raw materials must be gathered by hand at a distance and physically transported to the construction site. A major complaint from older people is that their housing is substandard, and, in truth, many older people live in houses that are more dilapidated than the huts of younger, able-bodied people. A few elders continue to live in grass huts of the sort constructed by !Kung when they were living in the bush. These grass huts are simpler for older people to construct and maintain themselves. They complain about their leaky roofs and crumbling walls and may get help from their children. However, when rain or cold sets in, elders whose housing is too shoddy move in for the night with their adult children and grandchildren.

Marriages are much more durable among !Kung than among Herero. Older couples spend a great deal of time together and cooperate in many tasks. !Kung marriage rates among older men and older women are not very different, unlike most other societies where older women are much more likely to be without a spouse. Among men over the age of 60 years, 80 percent are married, while 69 percent of women of the same age are married. Women continue to marry in their late forties and fifties. Some of this is because of the companionship nature of !Kung marriage; many !Kung reported that they like having a spouse, that living by oneself was not good. The scarcity of material goods also encourages remarriage to enable sharing of blankets, utensils, and housing.

Herero Society

There is marked sexual division of labor in Herero homesteads. Women are responsible for building and maintaining the houses and for milking the cattle of the homestead. Houses must be continually replastered, and the roof thatching must be repaired. The difficult job of repairing the houses is made easier because of availability of oxen, sledges, and yokes. Houses are large and substantial. Even women in their sixties and seventies undertake lighter construction tasks, but with age more of the work is accomplished with the help of others, especially children, help which the !Kung cannot count on.

Men manage the cattle. During the hot dry season, water must be lifted by hand from wells dug in limestone, and this involves hours in the hot sun lifting buckets of water several meters or more. The *kraals* (corrals) are constructed of large thornbrush that is cut, dragged in, and piled and that must be replaced frequently. This is heavy work that consumes many days each year. Although typically done by younger men, those in their sixties and seventies were observed dragging heavy thorn trees. Rather than retire, older people gradually relinquish more physically taxing activities to younger people.

Visiting is an important activity for pleasure, business, ritual, and social purposes. Upon the death of a relative, for example, people go immediately to the place of death and remain for as much as a year. Herero families are wealthy enough to entertain visitors for several weeks or months. Middle-aged and old people are frequently away from home on important social or ritual business while younger people remain behind to manage the village. Visiting is a means by which older people maintain control of their social environment; someone too old to travel is too old to be an effective social manager. With their donkeys and horses and high-quality tack, Herero routinely travel hundreds of kilometers even in their late seventies.

While people in their sixties and seventies are relieved of some of the very heavy tasks of daily life, those even older become increasingly dependent upon others for simple care—fetching coals from the fire to light tobacco, boiling water to make tea, fetching firewood and water. Primary caretakers are children, who are trained to obey adults and to have great deference and respect for the elderly. Many children are fostered to others among the Herero, and older people in need of care are often given children who will provide these services.

Among Herero there is an extreme disparity between marriage rates of older men and women: 77 percent of Herero men over age 60 are married, yet only 17 percent of older women are married.

SOCIAL STRUCTURAL CONTEXT OF AGING

In a comparison of !Kung and Herero, outward signs of the value of old people are most prominent among the Herero, but even among the !Kung the old are given respect and support. Different institutions of kinship have significant implications for the social and economic roles played by elderly individuals. As discussed earlier, in Herero culture people act jointly for a variety of purposes (funeral ceremonies, cattle inheritance, marriage arrangements) and make decisions about what individual or family should provide care and housing for a given elder, should that person lack close kin. Herero elders can assume that material and social resources will be provided, regardless of the precise nature and quality of the dyadic relationships that exist.

In !Kung culture, on the other hand, every individual has a different set of family members, and no culturally designated group identity emerges. Each person in !Kung society has kin, but a person's relations with various kin must be personally negotiated and cultivated over a period of years during which a history of reciprocity and "kin feeling" can be generated. For a !Kung,

merely having relatives does not guarantee support, even though there are norms about the ideal behaviors that ought to exist between particular kinsmen. Among the Herero, equipped with unilineal kinship, corporate groups assume responsibilities. The matrilineal group is called *eanda*, and *eanda* identity is important in the life of a person.

!Kung Norms

Among the !Kung, older people enjoy no special status, privileges, or authority as a matter of custom. Some elders are well provided for, but when this occurs, it is the result of having successful adult children with whom the elder is on good terms rather than a sense of obligation to elders.

!Kung children are not trained to show obedience and respect toward adults. They are cooperative but not quick to respond to adult commands and do not maintain respectful silence in the presence of adults.²⁷ Children are highly valued and are treated permissively by adults who watch them with benign resignation waiting for them to grow up and behave responsibly.²⁸ Thus, older people assume responsibility for younger, rather than the reverse.

As !Kung adapt more fully to the requirements of a food-producing, rather than a food-collecting, economy it is certain that children will receive more pressure from adults to be responsible and perform chores. Whether or not old people will benefit from these changes remains to be seen.

Unlike many African peoples such as the Herero, the !Kung do not foster their children to wealthier families or those in need of helpers. As a consequence of this and other features of !Kung life—the minimal division of labor, the absence of a hierarchy that obligates younger people to care for elders, and the scarcity of material resources—aging !Kung must continue to fend for themselves. This is accepted matter-of-factly. !Kung report two things that contribute to a good quality of life for an older person: first, having the physical

stamina to do for one's self and second, having adult children to provide food when one is too old or infirm to find food for one's self.

Herero Norms

The Herero are proud of their care of older adults in the same way that North Americans are proud of their care and rearing of children. This care is often mentioned as a significant life achievement. One woman described 30 years of care of her father with great satisfaction, while mentioning neither marriage nor children until specifically prompted.

Having children is critical to good quality of life in the later years. They prefer to have children of both sexes: sons to control the cattle that provide food and income and daughters to provide physical care, grooming, laundry, and house maintenance. One 95-year-old woman was identified as someone having difficulty because she had no daughters. She lived in the village of the son of her (deceased) cowife, and this man's wife was the only adult female in the village. She was, however, well groomed, and she said that she received excellent support even though none of the villagers were especially close kin to her.

Approximately 40 percent of children in this society are fostered to others to be raised, or "given" to old people with the expectation that they will later provide routine help and services. Elderly individuals often ask their relatives for children, and as these fostered children leave the village for school, a new child may be given to take up the duties. School-age children spend the week at boarding schools. The resulting absence of children in the villages has made life more difficult for the old.

The way that the ethic of care of older adults mirrors North American values about care of children is striking. Many North Americans believe that care of their children is their primary social responsibility, and they are proud of the achievements of their children. Herero believe that care of the old is their pri-

mary responsibility, and they speak proudly of the services they provide to them.

THE VIEW FROM WITHIN: WHAT PEOPLE SAY

People of all ages were interviewed about their perceptions of the life course. We asked in detail about stages, about transitions from one stage to another, and about the advantages and disadvantages of each stage. In these societies there are no clearly defined stages or celebrations of transitions: no graduation, no puberty ceremony, no job promotion, and no retirement. Even marriage and divorce did not signify much. Herero who could tell us the years of birth and death of all their grandparents did not remember the years in which their own marriages and divorces occurred.

We asked our informants to rate the overall quality of their lives at present, using a digit scale of 1 to 5. A rating of 5 (the thumb) indicated an old person in good health, well cared for, and with adequate resources to ensure food, tobacco, comfortable housing, and so on. A rating of 1 (the little finger) represented someone in poor health with no kin and few resources.

We used the same scheme to obtain ratings of various aspects of function. We asked people to rate themselves on ability to carry out common tasks of daily life like gathering firewood, cooking, and fetching water. We also asked about basic biological functions like vision, hearing, chewing, and picking things up as well as about social tasks like visiting.

For both !Kung and Herero, the single dominant component closely related to age was the ability to do physical work.²⁹ In other words, the perceived decline in functionality suffered by aging !Kung and Herero is a decline in muscular strength, coordination, and endurance. We did not, to our surprise, find that functions like vision, chewing, hearing, or digestion contributed to the self-perceived age effects.

!Kung Attitudes about Aging

People of all ages regarded old age as a blight. !Kung were unguardedly frank in their disparagement of old age. When asked our standard questions, "What is it like to be old?" or "What are the things that old people do?" younger individuals' responses were immediate and negative even if old people were present. Common responses were: "All you can do is sit and think about death." "When you are old, all of your strength is gone. You can't do anything for yourself." Elderly !Kung were equally negative about their old age. Themes of loss of physical vitality and loss of the capacity to do useful work were most frequently mentioned.

In the five-digit rating scheme, older !Kung consistently rated themselves a 2 or 3 on activities calling for strength and energy such as riding a donkey, walking to another village, carrying firewood, and gathering food. Old women were more likely to rate themselves low across all these tasks than were men.

On overall quality of their lives, !Kung rated themselves higher than we expected. Old men and women both rated themselves on quality of life at 3.5 out of 5, only slightly lower than the 4 that middle-aged people rated themselves. Young people rated themselves as 5. When we asked elderly !Kung to explain why they had given themselves the quality-of-life ratings they did, we received responses like: "Well, I'm still here. I'm old, but I'm not dead. I can still do things for myself." We found these responses surprising given the overwhelmingly negative stereotype of aging. !Kung elders must derive satisfaction from some factors in their lives such as their close relations with their spouses. Those who have living children reside close to at least one of them. Eighty-four percent of men over the age of 60 and 77 percent of women of the same age live within a half-hour's walk of a child if they have at least one child alive.

Herero Attitudes about Aging

The favorable view of the life of older adults, apparent to us as outside observers, was most emphatically not shared by elders themselves. Almost every old person said that old age was the worst and most unpleasant part of the life cycle. Their feelings about old age were almost bitter—they felt that young adulthood was best and that everything that followed was downhill. This evaluation was surprising, given the excellent care and the high social status of old people, and it refutes suggestions that aging is more pleasant in rural African societies than it is in European societies where the aged do not enjoy such high status.³⁰ Part of this evaluation must reflect the discomforts of the physical environment and lack of basic medical care available to elders in Western society.

The average self-rating on quality of life by old Herero was approximately 2. This pessimistic evaluation was the lowest of the seven sites studied by others doing similar research in North America, Ireland, and Hong Kong; in North America, for example, older people rated their overall well-being as greater than that of younger people, while the Herero perceived that well-being declined with age, far lower than perceived by the !Kung.

Informal reports were similarly pessimistic. For example, a Herero man in his late seventies rated his own well-being as very low, 1.5. He had a beautiful homestead, two loving wives, and large herds of cattle and goats, and he was a local spiritual leader. When we challenged his self-rating, he said:

Yesterday I walked to the well in the morning [where the cattle are watered, about 2 km from his village] and I saw that the gate post to my well was rotten. I cut a tree, took off the branches, dug up my gate post, and replaced it with the new one. Then last night I was awake half the night with pains in my shoulders, and today I am stiff and sore. I see that I am incapable of useful work any more. I am no good to anyone. I might as well give up and die.

SUMMARY

We have three general conclusions to emphasize as well as an observation about aging in these societies that we believe deserves elaboration:

1. Old people are treated well in both these groups but not because they are scarce. Both the !Kung and the Herero are low-fertility populations so the proportion of the total population that is old is high in both groups.
2. Old people do not appreciate what appears to be the good (!Kung) and superb (Herero) social support that they receive. They have nothing good to say about being old. While we perceived very positive aspects of aging in these societies, members of these societies do not share our perceptions.
3. The social support that old people receive in these societies does not begin to compensate for the absence of comforts routinely available in highly developed societies such as furniture, running water, central heat, antibiotics, analgesics, eyeglasses, and dental prostheses. Old people were, by our standards, remarkably fit, active, and involved. However, they had no choice; they could not withdraw in the way that older people in wealthy industrial societies can.

Compulsory and Voluntary Activity

We were impressed by the extent to which older people in !Kung and Herero society remained integrated into the lives around them and continued to play meaningful social roles. We do not mean to imply that all elders or even most elders are content. However, older people, including the frail elderly, were unfailingly knowledgeable about local events and sensitive to the opinions and attitudes of people with whom they were in daily contact. These elderly can best be described as "involuntarily active."

They lead full and complex lives because people and circumstances do not leave them alone. Until they are very old and near death, they are connected to many people in multiple ways. Not only is there no vocational retirement, there is neither social nor spatial retirement. People cannot choose to become less public and less accessible to the demands of others. Old people are not shielded by money or private housing from involvement in the society. Consequently they are immersed in the everyday wear and tear of living. These experiences are undoubtedly psychologically and physically exhausting at times and may well contribute to morbidity and death among the elderly. On the other hand, the high rates of compulsory participation keep old people challenged by novel events.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS

This study of two cultures identifies a number of factors that must be understood in order to evaluate the impact of culture on the experience of aging for any adult. They include:

- The nature of the culture, its economy, family structure, and place and types of residences
- Demographic factors such as birth rate, mortality, marriage and divorce rates
- The demands of life, both in terms of physical and social environment
- Cultural institutions like religion and government; cultural rituals
- Work and leisure roles and the value placed on each
- The degree of choice of activity available to the individual

Interventions planned without attention to these factors risk being irrelevant to the individual. For example, plans to return an individual to his home, with an assumption that adult children will provide support services, work only when there is a cultural expectation that adult children will do so.

Expecting individuals to shift interests from productive to leisure activities will work only when cultural values encourage (or at least do not discourage) this shift.

Clearly, factors other than culture enter into decisions about intervention. Individual differences are discussed in greater detail in the following chapters. Further, culture is not static, so understanding of a culture at a particular point in time will not suffice. Life is changing for the !Kung and Herero and is also changing in the United States. Cultures may overlap to create hybrids, as with Italian-Americans, Chinese-Americans, and other groups. The therapist must be sensitive to these issues both in gathering information and in providing interventions for clients.

Health care providers must understand their own culturally mediated beliefs and examine for each client the degree to which their beliefs match those of the client. For example, a therapist from a cultural background that stresses independence and individualism may have difficulty relating to an older client from a cultural background in which elders are expected to rely on family members and the community to take care of them. This difference in perspectives must be understood and accepted before realistic goals can be set for the individual. Further, the therapist must understand that neither perspective is "right." They are simply differing world views that are both "right" in a particular context.

Thus, in order to interact effectively with clients, the therapist must understand his or her own cultural beliefs and those of the client. While new ideas can be introduced to the client, goals set must reflect his or her wishes and desires based both on individual and cultural differences.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe the ways in which commonly held beliefs about mediating cultural factors may be inaccurate.
2. What factors make the external re-

alities (view from without) of aging more pleasant for the Herero than the !Kung?

3. Discuss the view-from-within evaluations of the aging experience for !Kung and Herero and some possible explanations for the differences.
4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of compulsory and voluntary activities for the elderly?
5. Discuss the implications of cultural factors for health care providers.

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